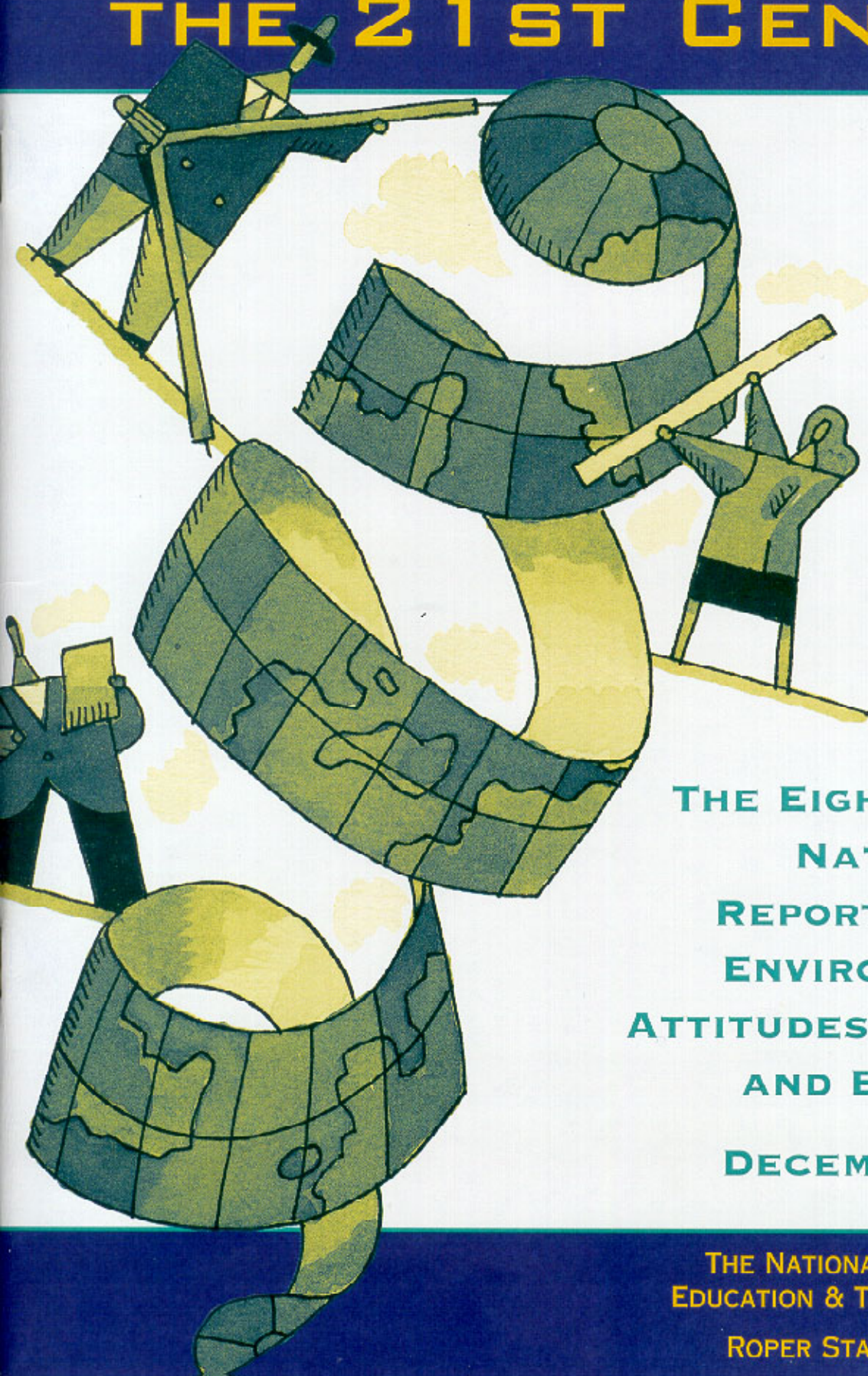


ENVIRONMENTAL READINESS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



THE EIGHTH ANNUAL
NATIONAL
REPORT CARD ON
ENVIRONMENTAL
ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE,
AND BEHAVIOR
DECEMBER 1999

THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL
EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION
ROPER STARCH WORLDWIDE

1999 REPORT CARD:
**Environmental Readiness
for the 21st Century**

The Eighth Annual National Report Card on
Environmental Attitudes, Knowledge, and Behavior

DECEMBER 1999

N•E•E•T•F

The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation

**R O P E R
S T A R C H
W O R L D W I D E**

About NEETF

The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation is a private nonprofit organization authorized by Congress in 1990. The Foundation strives to help America meet critical national challenges by connecting environmental learning to progress on issues of national concern such as health care, educational excellence, our competitive position in business and effective community participation in managing our natural resources. In addition to making leveraged challenge grants for outstanding environmental projects across the nation, NEETF seeks funds to support several innovative environmental education programs, which include, along with the annual NEETF/Roper Report Cards:

- **Wellness and The Environment:** integrating environmental health into our public health and health care systems.
- **Safe Drinking Water Program:** providing an educational backdrop to government Consumer Confidence Reports on drinking water.
- **Institute for Corporate Environmental Mentoring:** fostering business-to-business mentoring to help companies improve environmental and economic performance.
- **Environmental Education and Academic Excellence:** promoting effective, science-based and objective environmental education as beneficial to students' academic performance.
- **National Public Lands Day:** a nationwide, volunteer driven program improving and enhancing national parks, forests, lakes, wildlife habitats, and other public land sites.

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Foreword

Taking stock of our environmental “readiness” seems appropriate at this unique point on the calendar. Poised at the beginning of a new century, we are well positioned to consider where the American public now stands in relation to environmental protection and where we need to go. Few issues are likely to be more important in the early part of the next century.

How well suited are Americans to understand the environmental challenges we face? How well prepared are we to take action and make the decisions we will be called on to make? This 1999 Report Card demonstrates something we have long suspected: Americans are ill prepared to understand and address the complex and intractable issues that will be our greatest challenges in the 21st century. Even though concern for the quality of the environment and its relationship to human health will likely increase in the early part of the next century, knowing the issues and doing something constructive about the problems may be more difficult than ever.

Many of our leading environmental problems today and into the future will be the result of the accumulated actions of individuals. Issues such as freshwater shortages, global warming, systemic contaminants, run-off water pollution, and environmental problems caused by small businesses, homes, and automobiles will become more of a factor in our environmental future. Not only are these issues difficult for the public to understand in their full complexity, but they are also largely beyond the reach of government environmental regulation programs. Americans as a whole are vastly unprepared to address the suite of future environmental issues that will require personal knowledge and action. You might say our cumulative ‘EQ’ — our environmental intelligence quotient — is dangerously low. Rectifying this situation will require a much greater emphasis on education and training than ever before.

Despite some discouraging findings, there is much good news in the 1999 NEETF/Roper Report Card, especially for supporters of environmental quality. For a number of reasons, pro-environment sentiment and support are likely to increase in the coming years. The demographic reasons for this shift are discussed in the Report Card as well. I commend this report to your attention, in the hope that working together, we can become better prepared for our environmental future.

Kevin Coyle
President,
The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation



Executive Summary

This report examines a simple question: are Americans environmentally prepared for the 21st century? The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF) commissioned a survey to better understand what Americans know about the environment and how they view emerging environmental problems. This survey, conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide, includes an assessment of adult Americans' attitudes and behaviors toward the environment in addition to their environmental knowledge.

As environmental issues become more complex and increasingly the result of accumulated individual actions, the importance of environmental knowledge on the part of each American will increase. More will be required of both individuals and their leaders in our environmental future. Environmentally knowledgeable Americans will better understand what they as individuals can do to solve environmental problems and will be better motivated to take action. A knowledgeable public can also play a larger role in evaluating whether proposed environmental laws and regulations make sense, in determining what new policies are needed, in supporting government regulations and policies, and in claiming information that it is the public's right to know.

Unfortunately, the 1999 NEETF/Roper Report Card clearly shows that Americans are largely unprepared for these roles. On key emerging environmental issues, most Americans will need to catch up, if they are to understand the coming issues in environmental protection and help play a role in solving the problems.

Survey Results

The public's disturbingly low "EQ"* will block progress on many issues

- Americans are not prepared for our environmental future. Fewer than one in nine Americans gets a passing score of 60% on knowledge of issues likely to be major prob-

*EQ= Environmental Intelligence Quotient.

lems in the next 15-25 years. Just 1 in 25 scored 70% or above in a quiz of environmental knowledge.

- On average, Americans answered just three multiple-choice questions right on a ten-question quiz about issues in the next century.
- The public continues to engage in several simple activities such as recycling and saving electricity or water, that benefit the environment. But by and large, individuals have not embraced some of the most important actions that are within their power to control.
- There are important differences between what scientists judge as the most critical emerging issues such as climate change and population growth, and public awareness of these issues. These differences have significant implications for the ability of lawmakers and public officials to convince the public to take action or to understand the implications of these issues.

Environmental Readiness Report Card

ATTITUDE

Support for the environment

A+

Willingness to work toward balanced solutions

A

KNOWLEDGE

Understanding of causes of basic
environmental problems in the 21st century

F

Agreement with experts
on top issues in the 21st century

D+

ACTION

Willingness to take steps
to solve problems

B

Incorrect understanding of the environment will likely persist into the next century

- Myths and outdated information about important environmental issues remain entrenched as we move into the next century. Most Americans still do not know how most of the electricity in the United States is generated, some of the main causes of global climate change, or the most common source of water pollution of rivers and streams. Nevertheless, concern and support for the environment are high and likely to rise further.
- Support for environmental protection (70%) over the economy (18%) will likely increase even further in the first part of the next century as women, the younger generation, and urban residents increasingly move into positions of leadership. Thus, while the good economy has no doubt boosted support for the environment, it is by no means the only factor in current or future support.
- Support for government regulation of the environment is also likely to remain strong, while the percentage calling for additional regulation could easily increase from a 47% plurality to a clear majority in the early part in the next century.

Americans continue to support balance and compromise

- The current view, held by 61% of Americans, that the environment and the economy can go hand-in-hand is likely to be held by even more Americans in the next century due to demographic changes combined with changes in policy. A strong majority of Americans do not believe that environmental problems must be divisive or polarizing.

Health remains highest-ranked among environmental concerns but is ironically low in reflected knowledge

- Health-related issues — for example, relating to air, water, and toxics — routinely garner the highest levels of public concern and support, but actual knowledge of the causes of these types of pollution is not very high. Nor is it evident that people understand the relationship of environmental factors to disease. Only 7% of Americans know, for example, that contaminated water is the leading cause of childhood death in the world.

Americans worry about environmental disaster but fail to see the role of the environment in world conflict

- A majority (56%) of Americans continue to feel that we are headed toward an environmental catastrophe well into the next century.
- However, few Americans suspect that the environment is already one of the most significant causes of war and conflict in the world and that this threat to security will increase in the next century.

There will be a dramatically new landscape for environmental solutions in the coming years through local and individual action

- Even though support for environmental regulation will likely remain high in the early part of the next century, Americans are looking to individuals, environmental organizations, and citizen groups to provide leadership on environmental solutions, rather than large businesses or government agencies.
- The 1999 NEETF/Roper Survey shows that Americans are quite willing to act on environmental solutions if it is within their power to do so and if they can take such actions as part of their ongoing daily activities.

Recommendations for the 21st Century

Working with colleague organizations, the Congress, and the Administration, NEETF recommends implementing the following:

A New Index for Environmental Problem-Solving: Understanding Where Individual Actions Can Make the Most Difference

- Develop and publish a new People-to-Problem Index that measures the degree to which a major environmental problem — such as run-off water pollution — can only be fully addressed by educating and involving people, small businesses, and local communities. The Index should highlight which critical national environmental issues are most suited to solutions at the grassroots and civic level, thus helping to prioritize and target educational efforts.

New Social Science Research: Determining What Motivates Individual Action on the Environment

- Increase the commitment of the government and the non-governmental sectors to learning-driven approaches to solving environmental problems. Foster a comprehensive new program of research on how people learn about environmental issues and what motivates them to work toward their solutions.

More Environmental Education for the Media: Improving the Public's Understanding of the Issues

- The American media is considered the most influential source of environmental information for adult Americans. Yet there are few efforts to more thoroughly and effectively educate the media on complex environmental issues of the next century. We must strengthen our efforts to provide deeper background and educational materials and briefings to members of the media including sound scientific information, maps and visuals, and more.

Mediation Skills Training: Helping Communities Solve Local Environmental Problems

- As we move into an age where more balance will be sought between the environment and the economy, more attention will be needed in creating partnerships and refining skills that can produce constructive negotiation and mediation.

Environmental Health Education: Reaching Health Care Professionals

- We must redouble our efforts to help people make the connection between the environment and health. This should include the environmental education and training for health care and public professionals.